

LIVING HISTORY

“As you have sent me into the world, so have I sent them into the world.” John 17: v.18

John’s portrayal of Jesus’ prayer for his disciples is a remarkable statement about the way in which the disciples have come to accept their new role as ambassadors of Christ to the World. The disciples have been part of the traveling family of Jesus as he taught and moved inexorably towards Jerusalem and the Cross. The trauma of those last days became an integral part of their awareness of Jesus as Messiah, and of their own self-understanding. The experience was a part of the warp and woof of their very being, and it was because of this that despite the tragedy of the Cross they were able to be witnesses to Jesus in a dramatic way. And Jesus now can send them out into the world to be witnesses to him – and in this prayer one grasps the force of the way in which they see that Jesus has placed his commitment upon them.

They go out into the world to bear witness, because they have been witnesses. But what about us? In what way can we be witnesses to something we have not directly seen and hear? We have not walked with Jesus as he taught those about him. We have not heard him tell his stories, nor have we heard him talk first hand about the way in which he understood his life and death. We have not borne the tragic sense of loss, nor have we seen the empty grave. How can we be witnesses, and how can we bear testimony?

In pondering this question I thought of the way in which Annie Dillard writes in her book *An American Childhood* about the memories of her childhood and adolescence as she grew up in Pittsburgh. Childhood memories, she says, are clouded in the mists of time and memory is so fragile and fallible. An Annie revisits those fragile memories of her past she begins to sense her place in the context of a larger family beyond her home – her neighborhood, her city and her country. In this she begins to be aware that her childhood was a part of a history larger than her home and mother and father. She began to see that she was engulfed by the remote past – the nomadic society that had first roamed the wilderness, then the European settlers who had cleared the wilderness, and then the sweep of the industrialization of the North American continent. Let Annie Dillard speak for herself:

We children lived and breathed our history...without knowing or believing any of it.... A child is asleep. Her private life unwinds inside her skin and skull; only as she sheds childhood, first one decade and then another, can she locate the actual, historical stream, see the setting of her dreaming private life – the nation, the city, the neighborhood, the house where the family lives – as an actual project under way...I breathed the air of history all unaware, and walked oblivious through its littered layers. (p.74)

Annie’s past is the very warp and woof of her life. Her dreamed innocence was her connection with the very texture of the great sweep of history, and that history was not some remote story unrelated to her. The past had made her the child she had been and the young woman she had become, but she had not realized.

Reading again Howard Williams’ labor of love – the history of Colgate – one gets a sense of being part of history in the same way through being part of this church, but we do not fully realize what we are part of. Memory enshrouds our life in the living stream of history and in this is set our own unknowing innocent dreamed life. We have our place in a long history – and it is a history that goes beyond the founding of this village, this church and the college on the hill. Our church points towards a deeper dimension of life. The Church community which connects to those disciples taking up the challenge to witness to Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross stands in the midst of our dreaming life and brings us into touch not only with the past, but the One who makes sense out of that past and gives it meaning.

When we look at ourselves as members of this congregation of this church in Hamilton we remember that the first thing the settlers who came into this valley those many years ago was to form the congregation which became this church bringing them a sense of community, and later a wider purpose – the education of a ministry.

But what has this history, so fine and so noble, to do with us? We are not faced with their struggles, their challenges or their deeper sense of the great effort to find the necessities of life. I am reminded that the Hebrew history enshrined in the Books of Deuteronomy, Kings, Chronicles, Judges, and Samuel is a story of

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, HAMILTON NY
MAY 24 2009

the grand sweep of history – a story of nations and kings and movements of peoples. They tell of God's presence in battle, in victory and in defeat, in splendor and in slavery. But in the midst of these great books telling of great historical events with their meaning for Israel appears a small gem of a book, only four chapters long, a story about a widow and her daughter-in-law caught in a very personal family tragedy. It is the book of Ruth. Naomi's son, Ruth's husband, dies in a foreign land. Naomi releases Ruth from any obligation she might feel toward her and then expresses her desire to return home. But Ruth stays steadfastly by her side until Naomi's kinsfolk accept responsibility for the widow, through a kinsman named Boaz who takes Ruth as his wife. It is a simple and moving story about personal responsibility and human love.

A simple story is told in the midst of the tides of the great movements of history, a story that paints in muted tones the simple picture of one person's love and care. This story tells of the response of ordinary people to the demands of God revealed in the great sweep of history. For in the end, this is where God's mercy begins – in the caring and loving act of one human being. It is in the way in which you and I act towards each other that God speaks to the world. It is in the caring and loving acts that form the community that centers upon this place that the awesome divine power of God takes on meaning in human life. For all the battles and the power struggles of history – in the end it is the simple story of the book of Ruth that tells it like it is for you and for me: it is about the nature of love between family members, concern for others and about commitment and the taking of personal responsibility. The dreaming innocence of a person, resting on the history of God's saving acts, bring forth the life that is committed to care and to love and the acceptance of personal responsibility in daily life.

When we remember the story of this Baptist Church, we should see the way in which this past, our past, is a part of who we are as individuals so that we can respond with a new sense of ourselves. In bringing this past into our memory we see ourselves as being part of a larger story. Our commitment to God's love and our acceptance of responsibility, bring that love into our lives is our part in the ongoing story of the Church and makes us a part of the plot of the larger story of life. We may seem small and insignificant in the long story of this church, but we are a part of the whole, and a part of what the larger story is all about.

That is the importance of the story told in the Book of Ruth. But this simple story of family responsibility and love ends in this way:

“So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife...and she gave birth to a son. The women said to Naomi...Naomi has a son; we shall call him Obed. He became the father of Jesse, David's father.”

The simple act of love is woven into the larger story of the great King David and the long story of Israel. In our lives the small is the great because each life is lived under God and we are linked upwards to God.

Looking for who she was, Annie Dillard became alive when she touched the living world of the past – the history of home, neighborhood, town and country that had made her who she was. As members of this church we also look back at our history and the life of the community. But we also touched through our history by this small band of disorganized disciples who shared in the life, work and death of God's Son. As they were nurtured by his work and sacrifice, so are we enlightened, through the living Church, by their vision of the new life that broke into a divided world.

Through the Church our lives are touched by the power of that moment. We must arise from the dreaming innocence of our daily lives and touch again that moment of revealed love. Our coming awake to our history is one that calls for a response from us. It is not enough to dream on a lazy innocence. The past is what we are, but it is but a prelude to what is to come. It is brought before us to call us to a new sense of who we are as members of this congregation. To belong to that ever-living moment of Jesus' concern is to us a challenge to renew our deepest commitments. We accept the past as a gift of enormous value, but we must accept the present as a responsibility to live fully in the community around us by being determined to pass on our inheritance to the future. Our past shapes our present. Our present will shape the future.

At this time of transition it becomes very important that all of you renew your commitment and bring with the renewal a deeper sense of God's presence in our midst. Your past commitment made the community what it is and the renewal of that commitment will make it what it shall be. As you renew your commitment to

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH, HAMILTON NY
MAY 24 2009

what you have been as a Church you will take upon yourselves the connection with the past and at the same time ensure a revitalization of this community for the future.

JSM/May 24, 2009